

# History of the Language Sciences Geschichte der Sprachwissenschaften Histoire des sciences du langage



An International Handbook on the Evolution of the  
Study of Language from the Beginnings to the Present

Ein internationales Handbuch zur Entwicklung der  
Sprachforschung von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart

Manuel international sur l'évolution de l'étude  
du langage des origines à nos jours

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~~Ähnliche Ansichten werden auch von János Tsétsi (1650–1708) vertreten. Sein *Observationes Orthographico-Grammaticae* sind als Addendum zum *Dictionarium* von Ferenc Pápai Páriz (1649–1716) (Löese 1708) erschienen. Das ist ein ausschließlich die Regeln des Ungarischen beschreibendes Buch, das die schriftliche und sprachliche Norm festhält und zugleich verbreitet. Das Ungarische wird durch die geschilderte Entwicklung zunehmend als eine Sprache angesehen, die den anderen gleichwertig ist. Damit sind die Voraussetzungen zu seiner vollen Emanzipation durch die Spracherneuerung im 18. Jh. geschaffen.~~

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## 125. Normative studies in Malta

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### 1. The Maltese language

Maltese, born and developed during the Arab domination of Malta between AD 870 and AD 1091, is the only national language in Europe which is of Semitic origin. The end of the Arab period and the consequent gradual re-absorption of the island into the Western world – Malta was conquered by Roger of Normandy in 1091 – marked the beginning of an influx of romance lexis, particularly from Sicily. The linguistic ties with Malta's Mediterranean neighbour, and with the Italian peninsula in general, were further strengthened during the rule of the *Hospitalier Knights of St John of Jerusalem* (1530–1798).

By the time the British came to Malta in 1800, Maltese already had an identity of its own. However, as time passed, and especially during the latter stages of Britain's 164-year rule, Anglo-Saxon terminology, in particular in the technical and scientific fields, became part and parcel of the Maltese language, which was thus defined as a *mixed language* (Aquilina 1985: 42–62).

The evolutionary process of the language is still under way; a process which has been so intense that Maltese words of non-Semitic origin now outnumber those of Semitic origin (Brincat 1992).

### 2. The earliest Maltese word lists

Although foreign visitors to Malta in the 16th and 17th centuries had given their impressions of the island's language (Cassola 1992a), the first attempted codification of Maltese is to be found in the 17th century word lists of Hieronymus Megiser (ca. 1553–1618) and Philip Skippon.

Megiser, a professor of history at the University of Leipzig, visited Malta in 1588. Fifteen years later, in 1603, he published his *Thesaurus Polyglottus*, a multilingual dictionary comprising four hundred languages.

The 9 words gathered in Malta and included in this work constitute the first printed list of Maltese words (Cassola 1988: 78). In 1606, Megiser published an entire text about Malta, the *Propugnaculum Europae*, which contains a German-Maltese word-list of 121 words belonging to what he described as the ‘*parlata africana o moresca*’ spoken by the island’s population (Cowan 1964; Cassola 1988).

Englishman Philip Skippon, who had already travelled through much of Europe between 1664 and 1680, visited Malta in 1684. His description of the island, its inhabitants and its customs is contained in Churchill 1732: 618–616. As regards language, Skippon noted that “the natives of the country speak little or no *Italian*, but a kind of *Arabick*, like that the *Moors* speak; but in the cities, most speak *Italian* very well” (Churchill 1732: 624). In the final part of his description, Skippon lists 381 Latin words and gives the Maltese equivalent. The list is preceded by the words: *The curious will be pleas’d with the following specimen of the language of Malta*.

Both Megiser and Skippon resorted to the use of the Latin alphabet to transcribe the Maltese words.

### 3. The first Maltese dictionaries

The first published dictionary of the Maltese language is Michele Antonio Vassalli’s *Ktyb yl Klym Malti* (Vassalli 1796). The volume contains an appeal entitled *Alla Nazione Maltese*, a *Discorso Preliminare* and a Maltese-Latin-Italian dictionary in 682 columns on 341 pages. Vassalli utilises an alphabet made up of 21 Roman letters, the Greek letter *y*, and another 10 newly created characters denoting the Semitic sounds of Maltese.

The significance of Vassalli (1764–1829) and his works lies not only in his giving us the first published dictionary of Maltese, based on sound scientific study, but also, and more importantly, in the fact that he was the first intellectual to come up with the concept of *Maltese nationality* and with the idea of Maltese as a dignified *national language*.

Manuscript dictionaries of the Maltese language did exist prior to Vassalli’s publication. The most worthy of mention are the 17th century *Regole per la lingua maltese* (Cassola 1992b), Gian Pietro Francesco Agius de Soldanis’s mid-18th century *Damma tal Kliem Kartaginis mscerred fel fom tal Maltin u Ghaucin*, whose four volumes are written in

Latin alphabet, and the c. 1750–1770 anonymous *Mezzo Vocabolario*, which has only recently been brought to light (Cassola 1996).

### 4. The earliest Maltese manuscript grammars

Although the first published grammar of the Maltese language was Agius de Soldanis’s *Della lingua punica presentemente usata da maltesi*, which appeared in 1750, various attempts had been made previously at compiling a grammar of the language. Amongst these, one finds those of the Bishop of Epifania, Xiberras, the French Knight Tournon (Agius de Soldanis 1750: 61) and Commendatore Francesco Bardon (Mifsud 1764: 325). None of these manuscript grammars have, however, survived.

The one pre-de Soldanis grammar that did survive is the 17-page one contained in the *Regole per la lingua Maltese* manuscript, presumably compiled in the 17th century by the Provençal knight, Thezan (Cassola 1992b: 3r–11r). This somewhat skimpy grammatical description focuses mainly on the article, numbers, pronouns, possessive pronouns, the verbs *to be* and *to have*, and on the formation of the various tenses of Maltese verbs. The most notable feature of Thezan’s grammar and dictionary is that the author made use of a mixed Latin-Arabic alphabet, with nine Arabic characters and the Persian letter *cim* to denote the Semitic sounds of Maltese. Folios 3r to 4v of the grammar are devoted to a description of these ten characters, with examples.

### 5. The first Maltese grammarians

The first grammar of the Maltese language was, then, the one published in Rome in 1750 by Agius de Soldanis (1712–1770), a priest from the island of Gozo. Following the example of the German scholar Henricus Majus, Agius de Soldanis accepts the theory on the Punic origin of Maltese, a theory overtly publicised in the volume’s title. Agius de Soldanis’s main intention behind his *Grammatica* was “per agevolmente apprendere la lingua punica-maltese agli studenti Maltesi, e forestieri, abitanti in Malta” (Agius de Soldanis 1750: 65). To this purpose, and since he believed that the Latin script was the easiest medium to convey written Maltese, Agius de

Soldanis formulated a 26-letter alphabet exclusively made up of Latin characters.

The defect in Agius de Soldanis's work is that, having been built on the model of Italian grammars, it sheds very little light on word building and verb roots which, in Maltese, are strongly associated with Arabic forms.

In 1791, Michele Antonio Vassalli published in Rome his Maltese grammar (Vassalli 1791), written in Latin. Like Agius de Soldanis, Vassalli subscribes to the theory on the Punic origin of Maltese too. He divides his grammar into three main parts (*De Elementis*, *De Dictionibus* and *De Syntaxi*) and describes the constituent parts of the Maltese language in great detail. His 33-letter *Novum Melitensis linguae alphabetum* was to form the basis of all his future works (cf. 3.).

Thirty six years later, Vassalli published an Italian version of his grammar. In this edition, which is divided into five main chapters (*Dell'Ortografia Maltese*, *Delle Dizioni Correlative*, *Del Verbo*, *Del Nome* and *Della Sintassi Maltese*), Vassalli drops his theory on the Punic origin of Maltese. His intention, in fact, is to carry out some comparative analyses, establishing "un parallelo fra la nostra e la lingua Arabica del sesto secolo dell'Egira, con altre erudizioni analoghe alla Fonografia e Costruzione d'ambe le lingue" (Vassalli 1827: vii). His perception of Maltese as an offshoot of Arabic is, therefore, now quite clear.

## 6. Francis Vella and Fortunato Panzavecchia

From Thezan's times onwards, at least another seven authors made use of a mixed Latin-Arabic script to transcribe Maltese (Cassola 1992b: x–xvi); an approach which met with opposition from different quarters, including the educationalist Salvatore Cumbo (1810–1877) and the Arabist George Percy Badger (1815–1888) (Cassola 1992b: xiii). But perhaps the fiercest opposition came from Francis Vella.

Vella published his *Maltese Grammar for the Use of the English* in 1831, opting for a 26-letter alphabet based on the Latin script. In describing the Maltese language, Vella states that:

the Maltese tongue, as well as the English, has nine parts of speech, viz. [...] The Noun, The Adjective, The Article, The Pronoun, The Verb, The Adverb, The Preposition, The Conjunction, The Interjection (Vella 1831: 19).

He then goes on to describe these various linguistic features in detail. In his preface, Vella writes that the semi-oriental alphabetical method devised by Vassalli is confusing to those who want to learn Maltese.

On the other hand, if we follow the rules, and the Italian method, we do not only facilitate the means of learning our own language, but by these we afford great advantage to such of the Maltese as are obliged to learn the European ones; the root of the Maltese verbs, tho' it is at the third person of the past tense, will be no obstacle to them, as we intend to prove by facts (Vella 1831: 5).

For Vella, the lack of a proper alphabet is the main obstacle in the teaching of the Maltese language. In his words, "many causes have contributed to render abortive the efforts of Vassalli towards making literary the maltese language, and his employing the *Semi-oriental* system has been the principal." (Vella 1831: 4).

Vella's theories are reinforced in his successive works, including his *Dizionario Portatile*, where the author reiterates that the Latin alphabet is "l'unico alfabeto che concilia l'ortografia italiana, e maltese [e] mi giovò per scrivere quest'ultima." (Vella 1843: *Preface* entitled *Concittadini!*). Vella ends his preface by expressing the hope that his choice of orthographic system will end a fifty year crisis and solve the "interminabile questione alfabetica" (Vella 1843: *Preface*).

A couple of years later, Vella's hopes were dashed when Fortunato Panzavecchia (?–1850) published his *Grammatica della lingua maltese* (Panzavecchia 1845) and proposed some innovations, with the addition of codas to certain letters. The aim was to combine the Semitic features of Maltese with Italian orthography. Despite the fact that hardly anybody followed Panzavecchia's orthographic system, his grammar was to be considered the best since Vassalli's times owing to the fact that the author based his grammatical rules on the Arab morphology, a constituent part of the Maltese language (Cremona & Vassallo 1924: xv).

## 7. Maltese 19th century academies and scholars

During the 19th century, various academies and societies played a part in keeping alive the debate on the Maltese language. In 1840, the *Società Medica* appointed a commission chaired by Stefano Zerafa to draw up an al-



phabet for the Maltese language. The orthographic system which the commission published in 1841 met with little success.

In 1843, the *Accademia Filologica* presented its own 33-letter alphabet, based on the Italian system. This system was adopted in Maltese schools between 1850 and 1883 (Aquilina 1985: 87) and actually turned out to be the most popular until the current one was introduced in 1924 (Cremona & Vassallo 1924).

A 'phonetic' alphabet meant to include a different letter for each sound was devised by the *Xirka Xemija* in 1882. The *Xirka*'s orthographic rules, considered quite simple and effective, actually provided the basis for the modern Maltese alphabet.

Many were the Maltese writers of the 19th century and early 20th century who, through their works, contributed to the debate on the Maltese language. The most noteworthy of these are Giovanni Battista Falzon (1813–1884), author of a *Dizionario Maltese-Italiano-Inglese* (1845) and a *Dizionario Italiano-Inglese-Maltese* (1882), Antonio Emanuele Caruana (1839–1907), who wrote *Sull'origine della lingua maltese* (1896), and the *Vocabolario della lingua maltese* (1903), and Annibale Preca (1832–1901) with his *Malta Cananea* (1904). Caruana and Preca revived the theory on the Punic origin of Maltese.

#### 8. The first half of the 20th century

With the publication of the *Għaqda tal-Malti*'s grammar in 1924 (Cremona & Vassallo 1924), one can safely state that most of the problems relating to the standardisation of a Maltese alphabet were solved, and that the era of grammars based on a scientific approach was about to begin. G. Vassallo's *Il-Muftieh tal-Chitba Maltija* [The key to Maltese writing] (1901) had already paved the way for modern grammar writing by highlighting the fact that solving problems connected with the alphabet was not enough; proper grammatical rules were also required. The 1924 *Għaqda* grammar further emphasised this principle and thus managed to reproduce a system that, as well as being phonetic, with one symbol for each sound, "had also to be etymological to make the teaching of Maltese grammar as rational as possible." (Aquilina 1985: 78).

The most complete and detailed Maltese grammar of the first half of this century was,

however, published in 1936 by Edmund Sutcliffe (1886–1963). Sutcliffe considered that, prior to his publication, "no adequate [grammar] book has been attempted for nearly a hundred years" (Sutcliffe 1936: v). In fact, as far as Sutcliffe was concerned, the most ambitious Maltese grammars, like Vella's, had:

failed to grasp the grammatical structure of the language. This is especially noticeable in the verb. Not one of the Grammars enumerated in the bibliography presents a correct scheme of the verb. These remarks are made only to show the need of a new attempt to present the grammar and syntax of this most interesting Semitic language (Sutcliffe 1936: v).

The novelty in Sutcliffe's grammar is that it highlights the workings of Maltese syntax, with paragraphs on the syntax of the article, nouns, the adjective, verbs, pronouns, and the sentence as a whole. Moreover, Sutcliffe's grammar is of a comparative nature; his frequent comparisons between Maltese, Arabic and Hebrew making it easier to focus on the structure of Maltese.

#### 9. Joseph Aquilina (1911–1997) and Erin Serracino Inglott (1904–1983)

The end of World War II brought with it the end of fascism in Italy. In Malta, this meant that the strong prejudices against anything Italian, which had first appeared with the *Language Question* (c. 1880) (Hull 1993) and had continued throughout the fascist period, no longer had any reason to persist. From a linguistic point of view, this brought about the beginning of a more balanced appraisal of the Maltese language in its entirety, with both romance and Semitic elements being given equal dignity in the study of the language.

Joseph Aquilina's *The Structure of Maltese* (Aquilina 1959) marked the beginning of this new and scientific trend in the study of the Maltese language and thus "has for long been regarded as the classical description of Maltese" (Mifsud 1995: 3). Aquilina aims at a comprehensive phonomorpho-syntactical description of both the Semitic and the romance elements in the language, and reaffirms his approach in *Teach yourself Maltese*, where he states that excluding the Romance element would be "as absurd as writing a grammar of the English language including only the lexical and morphological Anglo-Saxon element, leaving out all the linguistic

Romance element.” (Aquilina 1965: vi). Aquilina is also the author of a *Maltese-English Dictionary* (1987–90), the most complete bilingual dictionary to date.

Erin Serracino Inglott is the author of the nine-volume *Il Miklem Malti* [The Maltese dictionary] (1975–89), the foremost Maltese monolingual dictionary. The last volume of the work also contains Serracino Inglott’s *Grammatika Umanizzata ta’ l-Ilsien Malti* [Humanised grammar of the Maltese language]. Serracino Inglott’s intention was to produce an easy to understand, “humanised” grammar. Apart from demonstrating ‘how’ Maltese works, he also aimed at explaining ‘why’ it works in such a way. This attempt at explaining ‘why’ the language works as it does can be considered an innovative feature of the Serracino Inglott grammar.

## 10. The contemporary period (till 1995)

Pedagogical grammars apart, the latest additions to the study of the language by Maltese authors are Borg 1988 and Cachia 1994. While the former work limits itself to a synchronic description of what is basically known as *Malti pulit* [Standard Maltese], the latter is divided into three main sections: orthography and phonology; morphology; verbs. A chapter on “Verbs and nouns and their pronominal suffixes” and another one on the “Orthography of Anglo-Saxon and Romance neologisms” are appended to the text.

What characterises the contemporary period, however, is the publication of a number of excellent works which analyse particular features of the language. Prevaes 1993, for example, is a historical study of Maltese, its origins and early Maltese texts. In particular, there is a chapter entitled *The Standardisation of Maltese* which deals with the codification of grammatical rules from Vassalli’s times onwards.

Vanhove 1993 may be considered the major work on the study of Maltese syntax. The author’s approach is essentially a synchronic one, even though the work is intended to focus on the evolution of the varying forms and sentence constructions in the course of time. Vanhove studies the morphology of the verb and compares the Maltese verbal system with that of other Semitic languages. Most of the work looks at auxiliaries, verb particles and verb prefixes. The author concludes that it

would be useful in future to develop a parallel study on Sicilian, Italian, English and dialectal Arabic in order to try and pinpoint the degree of influence of other linguistic families on Maltese syntax, and to determine the internal dynamics of the evolutions recorded in Arabic and the Semitic languages in general (Vanhove 1993: 430).

The latest publication on a particular aspect of the Maltese language is Mifsud 1995, an in-depth analysis of loan verbs in Maltese.

The immediate aim of this work is to analyse this continuum [of morphological types] and propose a typological classification of these morphological verb types, which moves from maximum to minimum integration with the native morphology. [...] A secondary aim of this work is to provide future grammarians with a rational and systematic grammatical classification of loan verbs, thus helping to complete the pedagogical description of Maltese. [...] This work could also help in an assessment of the productiveness of select morphological features, leading eventually to a more realistic pedagogical approach to Maltese grammar (Mifsud 1995: 8).

Mifsud has certainly succeeded in achieving his declared aims. Indeed, his pioneering work, together with that of others like Aquilina and Vanhove, should open up new pastures to future scholars, who will undoubtedly benefit from the great progress made in the field of scientific normative studies in Malta during the latter part of this century.

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